

Bill for new casinos advances

Detroit could get more competition

February 14, 2008

By TODD SPANGLER

FREE PRESS WASHINGTON STAFF

WASHINGTON -- An old plan to put American Indian casinos in Romulus and Port Huron got new life Wednesday, as a House committee overwhelmingly approved it despite strong opposition from some other tribes, rival casinos and Detroit officials.

Now, the measures could be headed to the House floor, where C-SPAN viewers could see Michigan's divided congressional delegation battling it out over bills that one side calls an equitable resolution to century-old Indian claims and the other considers "reservation shopping" for new casinos.

Advertisement

"I think it was a miscarriage of justice," Rep. Carolyn Cheeks Kilpatrick said Wednesday of the vote.

She, like her son -- Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick -- is dead set against the proposal, which would place a new casino in Romulus, about 25 miles from downtown Detroit. She said she's not against competition but noted that Detroit's casino operators "invested in our city when no one else would."

Divisive deal

Figuring out who is for and who is against the proposal is harder than remembering when to stand or hit in a hand of blackjack.

There's the Sault Ste. Marie Tribe of Chippewa Indians, the majority owner in Detroit's Greektown Casino, for example. It supports the plan because it would be the one opening the Romulus gaming hall. Tribal officials say it wouldn't hurt their business downtown.

MGM Grand is clearly opposed. It opened its new \$800-million permanent casino in downtown Detroit in October. Some of its critics say MGM is linked to ads and flyers put out by a group urging people to call their Congress members to stop casino

expansion in Michigan -- a stand those critics say is hypocritical.

Last week, Rep. John Dingell, the Dearborn Democrat who sponsored the legislation for the Romulus casino, which would be in his district, likened the tactics to those used by disgraced lobbyist Jack Abramoff.

Before Wednesday's vote, House Natural Resources Committee Chairman Nick Rahall, a Democrat from West Virginia, invoked Abramoff again, noting that he had once worked to block these casinos. Abramoff worked for a rival tribe, the Saginaw Chippewa, which owns Soaring Eagle Resort and Casino in Mt. Pleasant.

"It's been a long road," said Rep. Candice Miller, a Harrison Township Republican who has been pushing the Port Huron proposal for years.

Rep. Dean Heller, R-Nev., tried to derail the bills with amendments that would have required more government oversight and review before allowing casinos on the properties in question. They were beat back decisively before a roll call on each bill. The Romulus proposal passed, 26-5; the Port Huron one, 21-5.

A long way to go

While Wednesday's action represents the farthest the bills have come since 2004, they still face big hurdles. House Speaker Nancy Pelosi's office gave no indication Wednesday what the California Democrat's plan was, and neither Rahall nor Rep. Dale Kildee, a Flint Democrat who serves on the Natural Resources committee, knew whether she would bring them to the floor.

It doesn't hurt, though, that Dingell -- the longest serving active member of the House -- has made the Romulus proposal his cause, or that both bills passed so easily.

The legislation dates to 2002, when then-Gov. John Engler negotiated land swaps with the Bay Mills Indian Community and the Sault tribe to settle claims to 110 acres of land in the Upper Peninsula.

In exchange for dropping its claims, the Bay Mills tribe would get land for a casino in Port Huron.

The Sault tribe, meanwhile, wants a casino in Romulus, near the airport.

Last year, Gov. Jennifer Granholm renegotiated the deals, with the state standing to get a bigger cut of the proceeds from the casinos.

Even if they get out of the House, the bills face an uphill battle in the Senate -- where rival casinos and those who say they are a precedent for off-reservation gaming are expected to fight them. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, a Nevada Democrat,

opposes the bills.

It could set up a battle between those who say it is a state matter -- albeit one involving a land claim, which must be approved by Congress -- and those who believe it sets a national precedent.

Sen. Debbie Stabenow of Michigan supports both bills. Michigan Sen. Carl Levin, up for re-election this year, supports the Port Huron bill but has remained silent on the Romulus proposal.

Contact **TODD SPANGLER** at 202-906-8203 or at tspangler@freepress.com.